

7-1-1986

# Stability and Change: Luther College After One Hundred Twenty-Five Years

Leigh D. Jordahl

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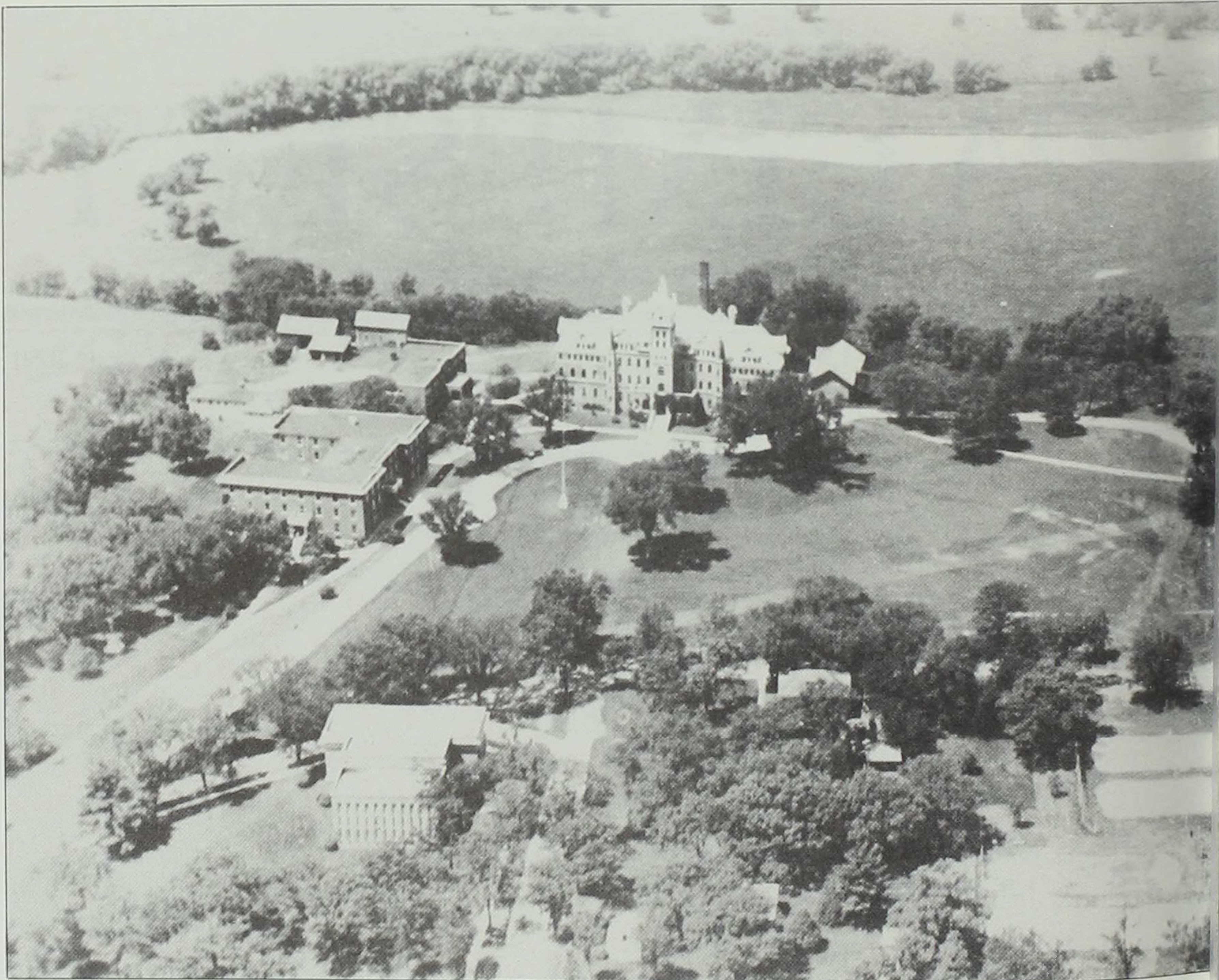
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## Recommended Citation

Jordahl, Leigh D. "Stability and Change: Luther College After One Hundred Twenty-Five Years." *The Palimpsest* 67 (1986), 102-117.  
Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol67/iss4/2>

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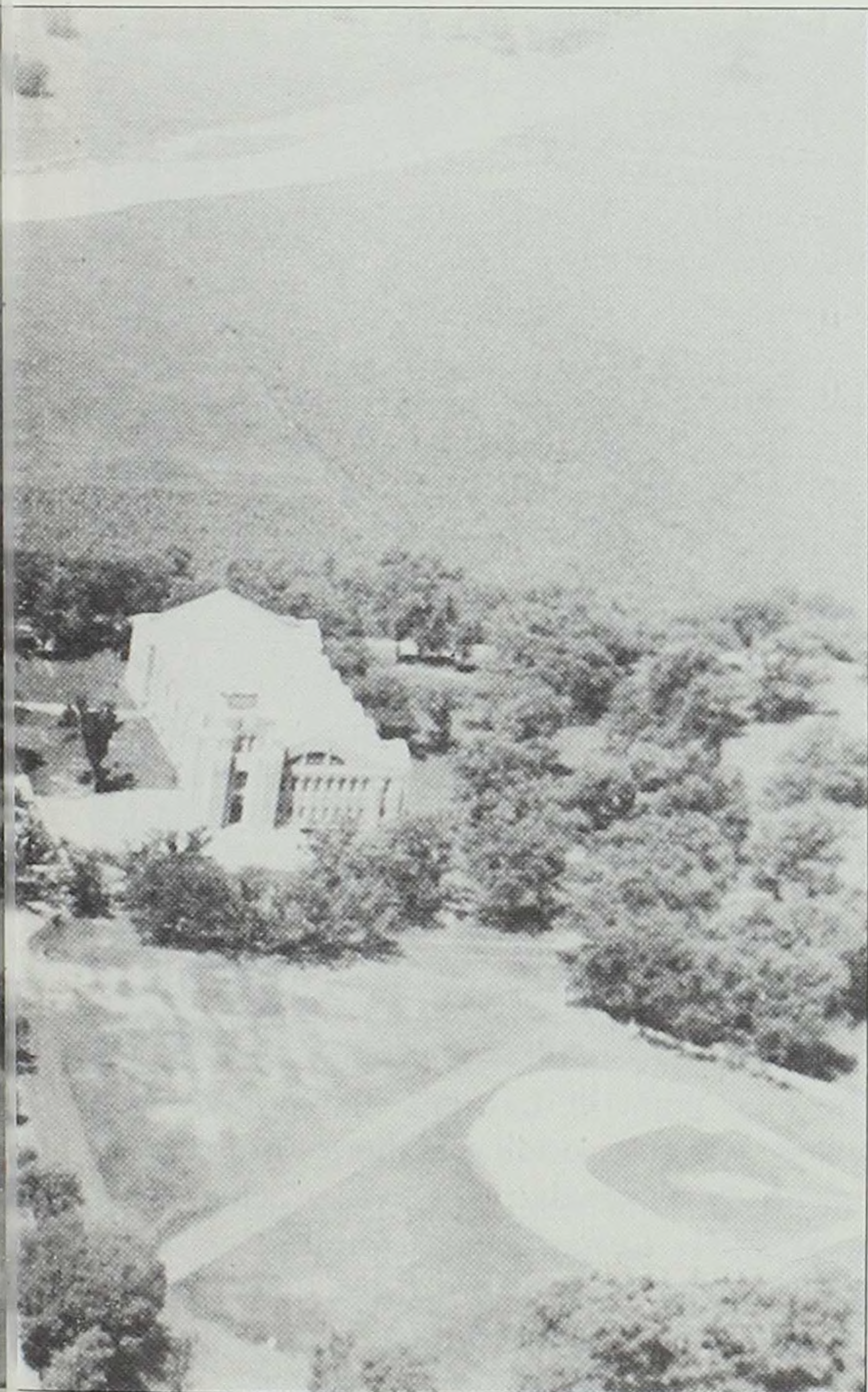


Luther College celebrates a *quasiquicentennial* in 1986. With the opening of the 1986-87 academic year the college will complete one hundred twenty-five years of service. The history of Luther's one hundred twenty-five years and seven presidential administrations can be divided into three periods. From 1861 to 1932, Luther College was a school for men modeled closely on the classical humanistic pattern that the founding fathers had brought with them from Norway. The long presidency of Laur. Larsen began in 1861 and

lasted until 1902 when he was succeeded by C.K. Preus. Following Preus' death in the spring of 1921, Oscar Olson became Luther's third president, serving as such until 1932. During those seventy-one years under three presidents, neither the curriculum nor the educational philosophy of the college changed in essentials.

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## Stability and Change

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*Aerial view of Luther College in 1934, as photographed by Clarence O. Kvale. (This photograph and many others in this article and the Jens Jensen article are provided courtesy of the Photographic Collection, Luther College Archives, Preus Library. These photographs are designated throughout as "courtesy LCA.")*

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The second major period in Luther's history

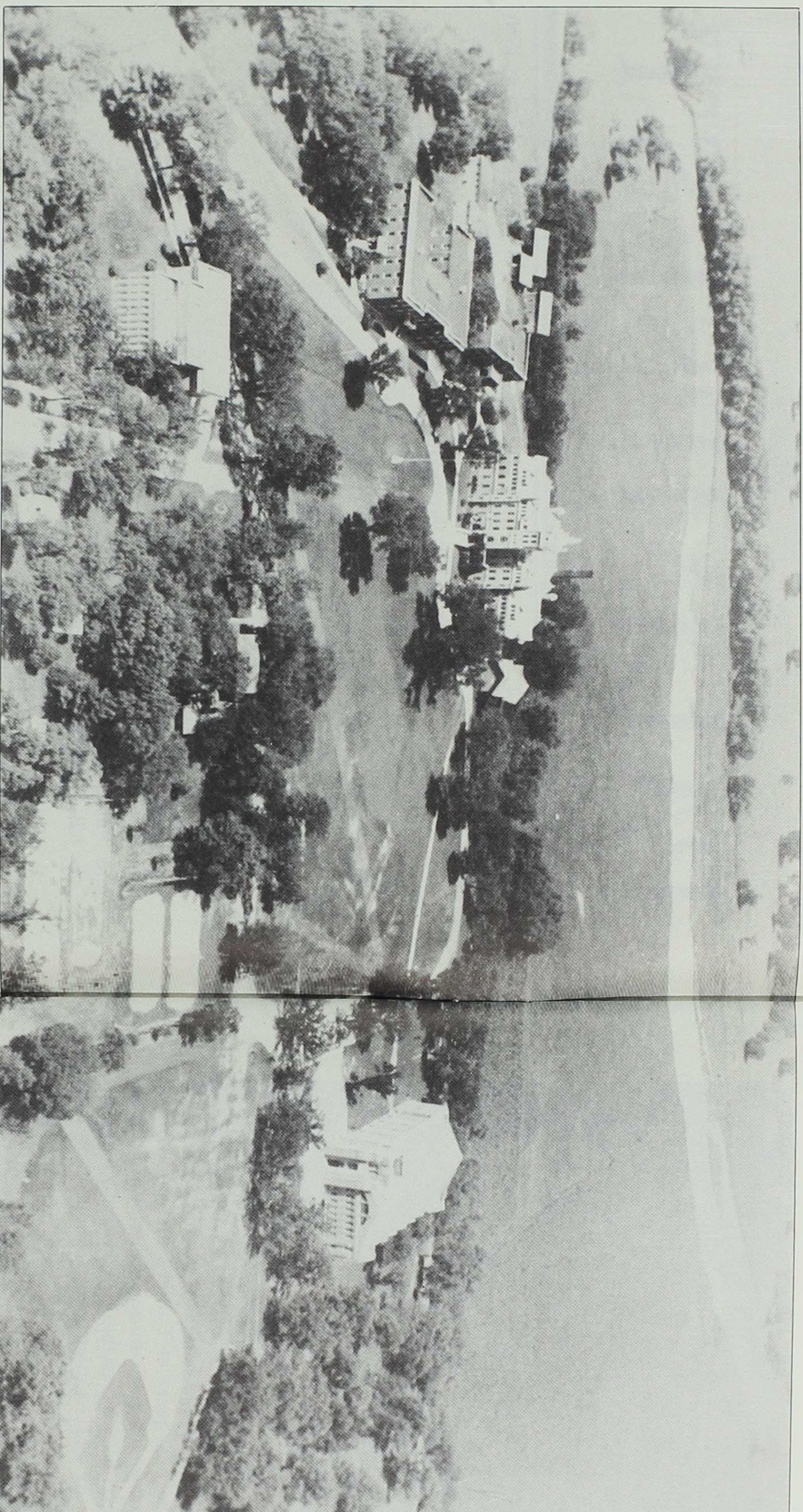
began in 1932, when O.J.H. Preus succeeded Oscar Olson as president. That same year Luther discarded its prescribed classical curriculum; with that momentous change a new era began. As is often true at moments of transition, Luther's change of orientation was accompanied by crisis, problems of morale, reform, and determined new beginnings. The new beginnings hung in the balance for the next several years because of the Great Depression that hit the entire nation and hit Luther College with especial force. Yet under President Preus' leadership the college became what it has since chosen to remain: a mainstream coed-



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educational private college with close church relationships. Since then the college has tried to balance a central commitment to the liberal arts with attention also to career goals. As at other colleges, the balancing act has not always been easy. The period between 1932 and Luther's centennial year in 1961 was characterized by a concerted effort to preserve the best of Luther's humanistic tradition while adapting the college to the demands of a constituency that was overwhelmingly Norwegian-Lutheran and distinctly middle-class, and rural or small-town in origins.

Luther's second period came to its end, though not in any such dramatic way as that marked by the end of its first period, with the centennial celebrations of 1961. That same year David T. Nelson produced a full-scale history of the school, *Luther College, 1861-1961*. The college celebrated by Nelson's book had clearly kept faith with its founders' intentions to be a school for "emigrated Norwegians, Lutheran Christians, living in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois . . ." Homogeneity, both as to faith and culture, characterized Luther College to a degree not common in American higher education in those expansionistic years.

A third period in the history of the college began shortly after the centennial year. Elwin D. Farwell was elected Luther's sixth president in 1962. With his administration, a new and aggressive style became apparent. An already major building program was carried forth and brought to a successful completion. A vigorous student recruitment program, organized along the lines of up-to-date, professional admissions models, brought the college to optimal size. The faculty was expanded, the student body and faculty became far less homogeneous religiously and ethnically, and Luther steadily moved into a new prestige league among American colleges. Yet the Farwell administration, while overcoming remnants of provinciality, was also determined not

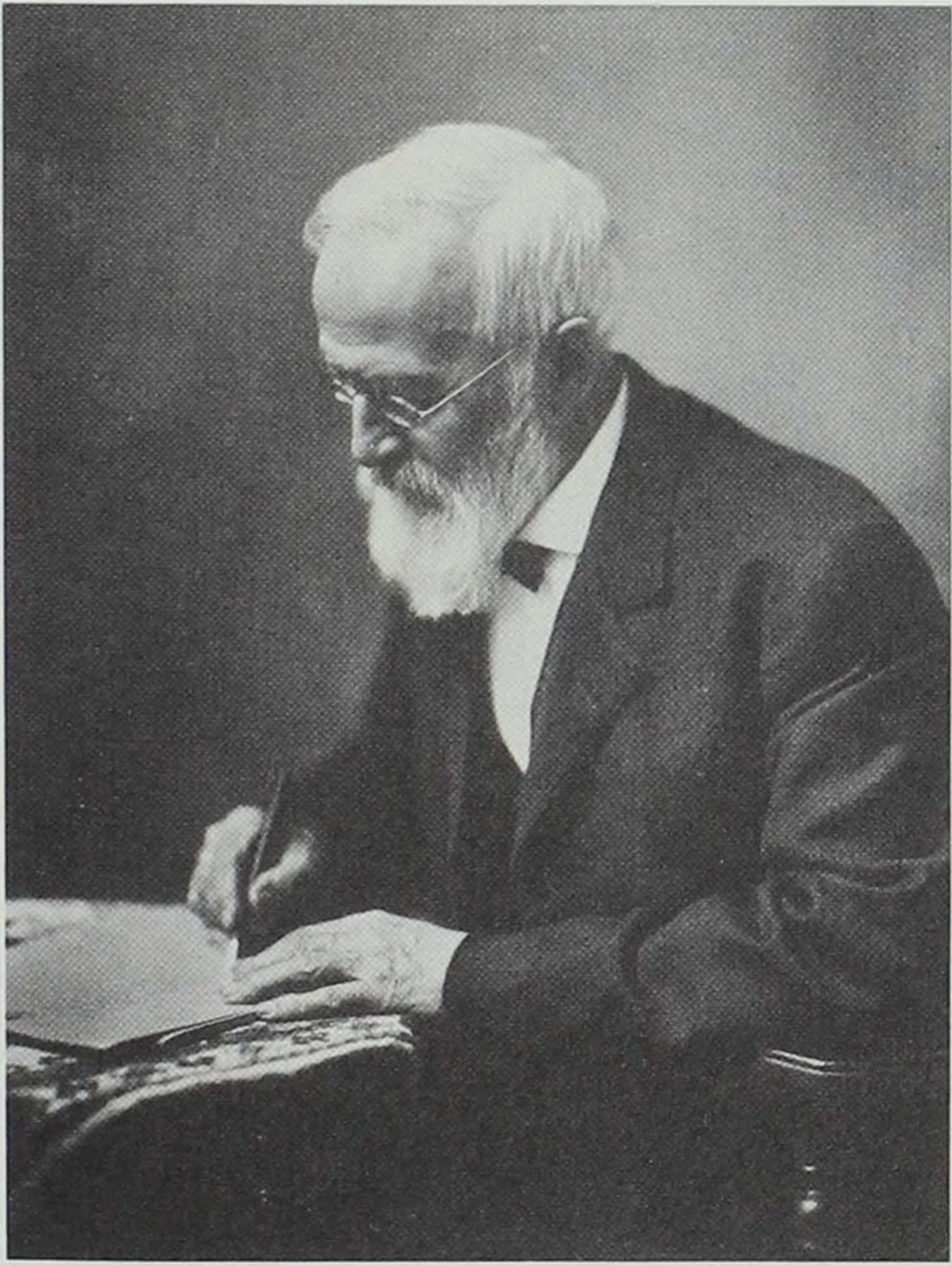
to break continuity with the past tradition of the essential compatibility of higher learning with self-conscious and articulate faith. At no time has Luther intended to be anything other than a college of the church, or, as the college mission statement puts it, "at once a community of faith and a community of learning."

### *The First Period: 1861-1932*

A well-established college with sound academic standards, generally flourishing on its beautiful, oak-forested campus in the scenic hill country of northeastern Iowa — such was Luther College when it celebrated its sixtieth anniversary in the fall of 1921. It was a gala event with four days so packed with events that the schedule was continuously running late. The Saturday night banquet featured eight speakers! That was a bit excessive even in an age accustomed to after dinner speeches. Little did anyone realize what in retrospect appears so obvious: that the anniversary represented the high point of Luther's first period. The college was prospering and there were reasons aplenty to have on the occasion a big celebration.

By 1921, Luther, and several other Iowa colleges, had achieved the distinction of having survived from those frontier days of the previous century when scores of colleges had been founded all across the American Upper Midwest. (Several Iowa colleges that survived, however, were not destined to make it through the next two decades.) Most of the private midwestern colleges were like Luther in that they had been established under religious auspices. The Methodists and Presbyterians had been especially energetic in Iowa, the latter group well out of proportion to the size of its membership. Most of the colleges at their founding were especially identified with some visionary individual who dared to dream big dreams. For Luther there had been two men in particular: the first president, Laur. Larsen, and U.V. Koren, pioneer pastor at the historic





Laur. Larsen, Luther's first president (1861-1902). (courtesy LCA)

Washington Prairie Church near Decorah. (Koren's wife, Elisabeth, whose interesting diary has since been translated and kept in print, achieved status as a kind of founding mother.) Such colleges were all products of an optimistic frontier mentality with a belief in upward mobility as a realistic possibility for ordinary children of ordinary parents. Most of the colleges founded were liberal arts schools with the special aim of preparing their students for such public service professions as school-teaching and the ministry. As church schools they intended to join the faith with the higher branches of learning.

From the very beginning the midwestern colleges displayed distinct features of Yankee ingenuity as well as a distrust of European gentry models. Most significantly, the frontier schools were not designed for the sons and daughters of ladies and gentlemen of a priv-

ileged class. Consequently also, the curricular patterns adopted were mostly not transplanted from old-world models. The schools tended to emphasize an egalitarianism truly suspicious of anything that might suggest elitism. Such schools as Oberlin, Beloit, Carleton, and Grinnell, more successful than many similar institutions, were the most prominent representatives of the midwestern pattern of higher education.

Founded in 1861 by the Synod of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (generally referred to as the Norwegian Synod and representing high Lutheran orthodoxy), Luther College intended to be the major college for Norwegian immigrants. The aims of the college were clearly stated:

*The chief object of the College is to meet [the growing demand for educated men who could preach the Word of Life to the rapidly increasing Norwegian population of this country]; but it also aims to afford the advantages of a liberal education to any youth, desiring to avail himself of the same.*

*Believing, that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," it regards mere mental training without christian faith and love as possessing but a doubtful value. For this reason it desires through its religious instruction and christian influence to reach as many as it can also of those who do not intend to serve the church directly as pastors or teachers, trusting that those whose education has been based on christian principles will, also in other vocations, both morally and intellectually, exert a beneficial influence among their countrymen and fellow-christians.*

Neither the circumstances under which the college was founded nor the language about Christian nurture was in any way distinctive to





*Four students represent Luther activities in 1892/93. From left: Ivar A. Thorson, Erling A. Bothne, Helge M. Tjernagel, and Oscar L. Olson, later Luther's third president. (courtesy LCA)*

Luther. Sixty years later a faculty member pictured Luther as having been "the offspring of horny handed labor, begotten of faith, reared in love and hope." The same could have been said of most colleges founded in the nineteenth century. Certainly it was no mark of distinctiveness for Luther's founders to state that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge." What may have been more distinctive, given the undoubted sincerity of the religious commitment, was the essentially secondary status assigned to religious instruction at Luther. The courses carried less credit than other courses, they were taught by instructors whose chief expertise was in some other aca-

demic discipline, and they were mostly catechetical in nature. Neither was there any emphasis on experiential piety, and the daily chapel services were distinctly low-key and conducted with the prayers and short meditations read out of some traditional home devotion book. It was simply assumed that the students were Christians and the fact did not have to be talked about. Luther was not an evangelistic college.

If the college founders were similar to other college founders in their commitment to combining faith and learning, they were also similar in their commitment to American egalitarianism. Although the Norwegian Lutheran

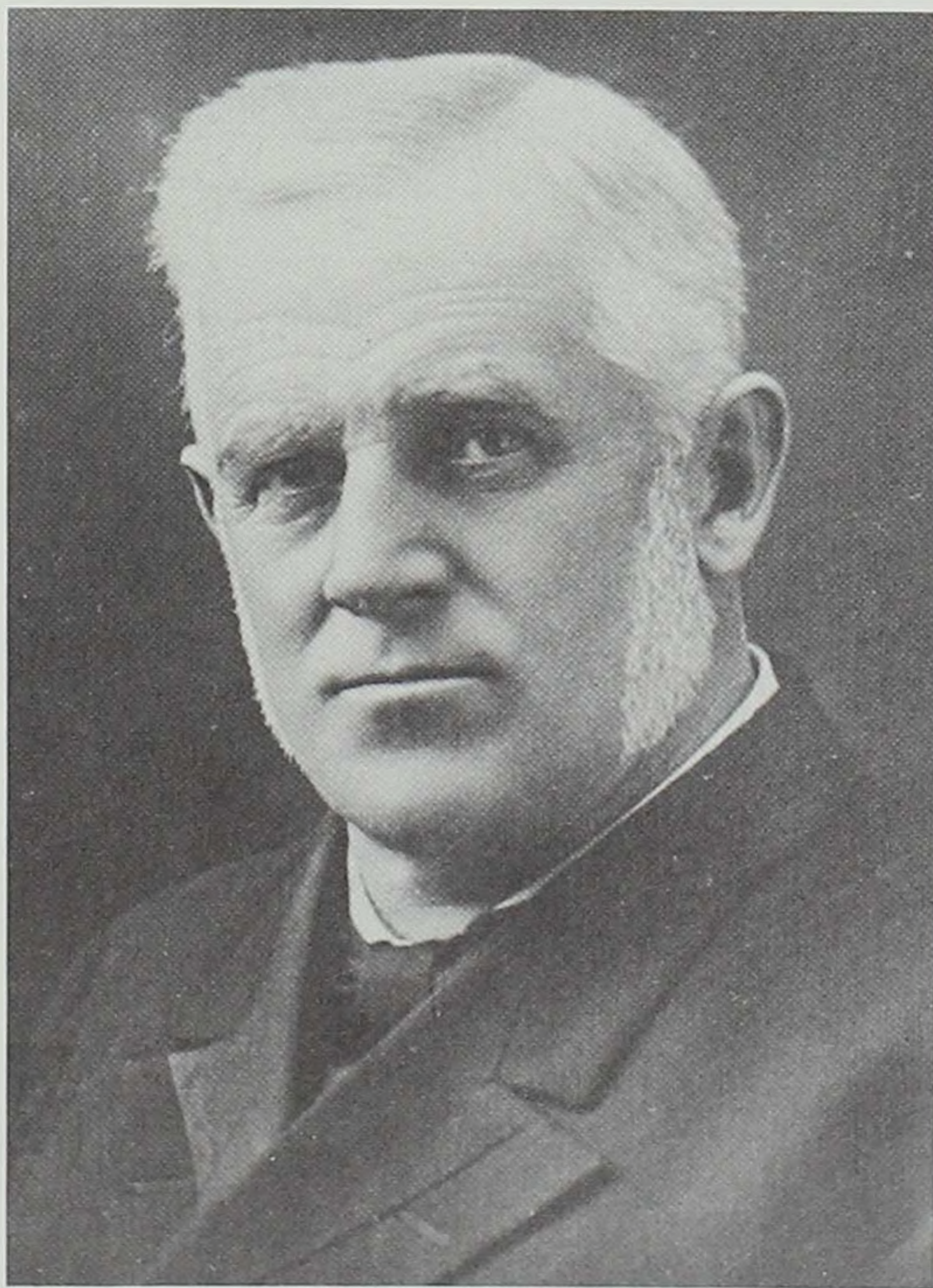


immigrants were strikingly different from their Protestant neighbors (more like the Catholics in their resistance to assimilation and their disdain for the Yankee Protestant ethos), and although the college founders were themselves representatives of a Norwegian gentry class, there was never any intention of perpetuating aristocratic class distinctions at Luther. Not surprisingly, Abraham Lincoln rather than the patrician George Washington became the beloved folk hero for the Norwegian immigrants. When the decision was made in 1857 to found a college, it was understood that it would serve immigrants, the vast majority of whom came from Norway's peasant class and who tended to settle down in America among other Norwegians in ethnically homogeneous townships. (One such township, notable for its support of Luther College, was the home of only one non-Norwegian family as late as the 1940s.) Like the Yankees, with whom the Norwegians otherwise had so little in common, the Norwegians were true populists in their egalitarian impulses and were just as eager as the Yankees to capitalize on the social mobility promised by America's democratic faith. ("Yankee" was a term regularly used by the Norwegians to refer to most of the non-Lutheran and Catholic population that the Scandinavians encountered on the frontier.)

However, Luther College was unique among Iowa colleges in one important respect, and very different than most in another respect. It was different in its long maintained determination to be a school for men. Single sex institutions, though common in the East, became a rarity in the Midwest, except among the Catholics. In one important respect, however, Luther College was unique. In its resolute and also long maintained determination to transplant the European "Latin school" model it most closely resembled the numerous Catholic "minor seminaries" and the several Concordias founded by the Missouri Synod Lutherans. Yet Luther was different from

them. The Concordias, for instance, did not become full-fledged colleges and they were specifically designed as "feeders" for the seminary. The classical languages were cultivated, as at Luther, but primarily as vehicles to be put to use in the later study of theology. Luther College, on the other hand, was never narrowly pretheological. Rather the classical authors were cultivated because they were viewed as humanistic avenues of introduction to the best that had been thought and written. If one wanted a liberal arts college, so the founders reasoned, that aim would be best accomplished through a classical education. In his defense of the classical curriculum, President Larsen presented his case forcefully with all the arguments of the Renaissance humanists.

Whether or not Laur. Larsen ever doubted



*C.K. Preus, Luther's second president (1902-1921). (SHSI)*

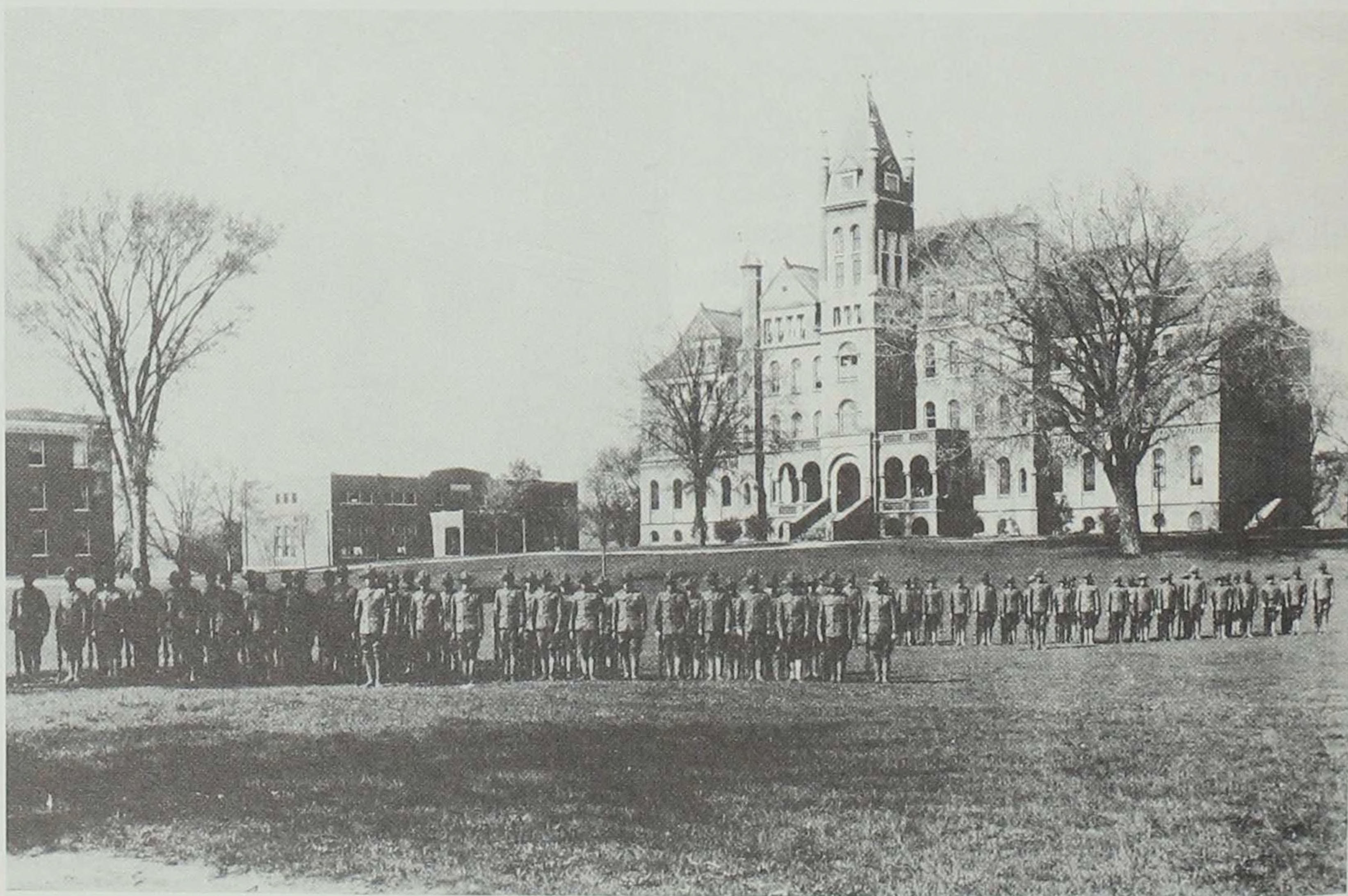


the wisdom of the curricular decision originally made for Luther is impossible to ascertain. We do know that any doubts he might have had were quickly set to rest. Only a few years after Luther began he went on an extended tour to see what was going on at other American colleges and thus to compare his school with other schools. He was not much impressed by either Beloit or Oberlin, both of which were sometimes seen as models of excellence. He spoke with disdain of Oberlin as representing "the pinnacle of Yankee humbug and conceit." He especially deplored the decline of the classical languages and was convinced that without a "true classical foundation" civilization would "sink into barbarism." In all events, Laur. Larsen returned from his travels well pleased with the Luther program.

A solid course it was that Laur. Larsen established. With a six-year program (later lengthened to eight), the courses were entirely

prescribed until 1895. That year economics was added as an elective. In 1906 a curricular revision introduced a few electives in the junior and senior year. Hebrew, formerly required, became an elective in 1918 (unlike Latin and Greek, Hebrew was viewed less as liberal arts than as distinctly pretheological). Enough education courses were introduced to make it possible for students to earn a teaching certificate. Yet even after requirements were relaxed, students studied six years of Latin, three of Greek, two each of German and Norwegian and several of history, English, and mathematics. The required science was chemistry.

When President C.K. Preus died in 1921, Luther College was making preparations for the gala anniversary already noted. Things looked good for Luther. The enrollment stood at a high point of 272 in the collegiate and preparatory departments combined. The stu-



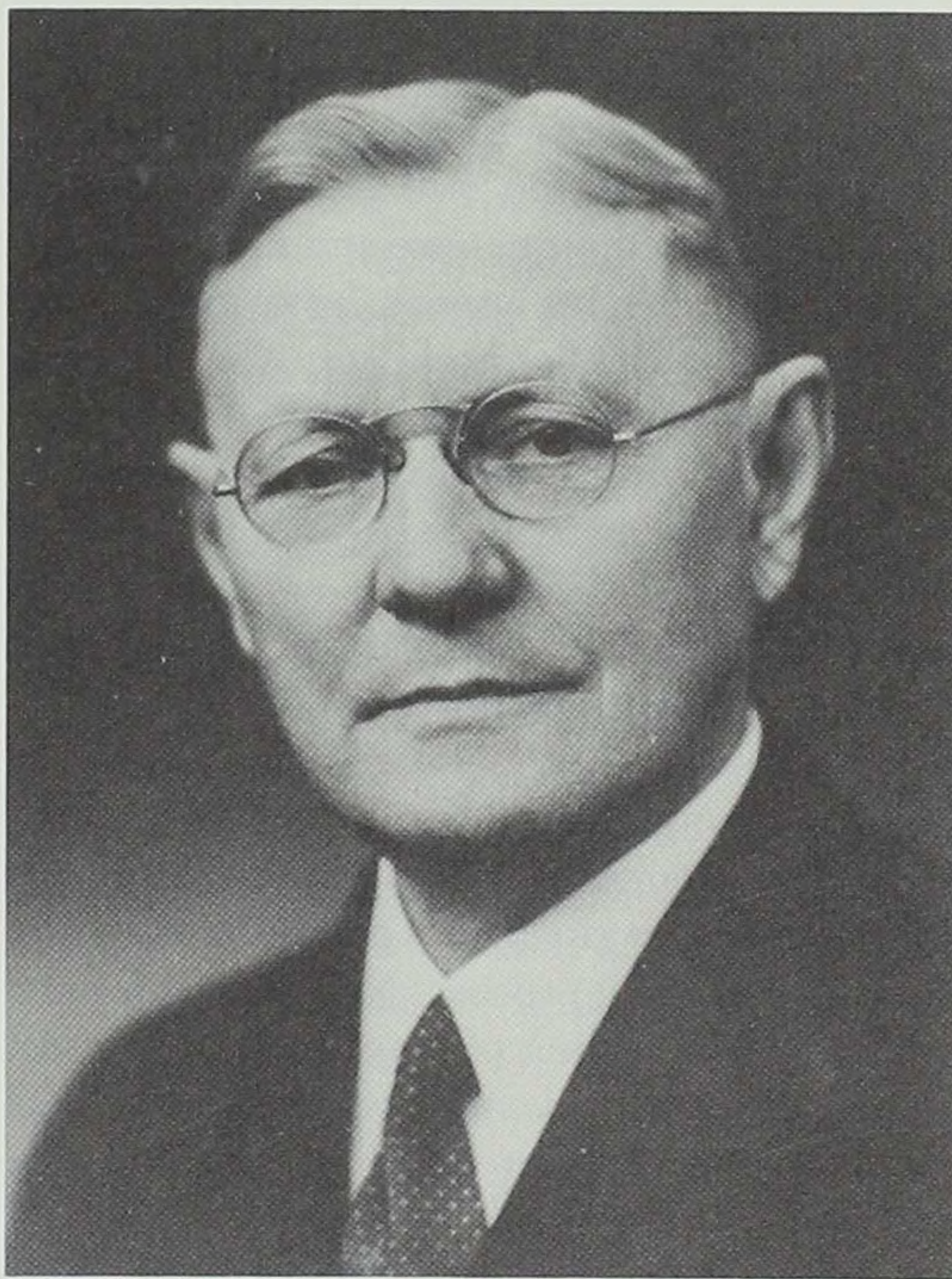
*Student Army Training Corps by Main Building, 1918. (courtesy LCA)*



dents were generally the first generation in their families to go to college, with Minnesota most heavily represented in the student body. With the exception of a few local boys, the students were Norwegian and Lutheran. The majority were not pretheological. The faculty numbered twenty-two members, and several had graduate degrees from good universities such as Michigan, Chicago, and Johns Hopkins. The faculty was larger than at several other regional colleges with far more diversified offerings. Most of the teachers were themselves alumni and all were Lutheran. Already by 1921, the college had achieved full accreditation from the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, a distinction not achieved by some Iowa colleges until a decade or two later.

Three of the anniversary speakers were drawn from graduating classes spanning fifty years. Yet so little had Luther changed in character that the three men had read the same classical authors and had received an education that was marked by exceptional continuity. No other accredited American college in 1921 had a curriculum as solidly classical as Luther's.

On the surface, the changes in the college had been enormous. From a vacant parsonage near Holmen, Wisconsin, used during the 1861-62 academic year, the school had been moved to Decorah in 1862. By 1921, Luther possessed a physical plant that must have been the envy of some Iowa colleges. It included a large and impressively beautiful main building, a relatively new and up-to-date dormitory, a commodious refectory, and a newly dedicated library that was a gem of architectural design and modern library planning. A new gymnasium was in the planning stage; when completed in 1926 it became the center of campus activities and was something of a regional showcase. The spartan life-style of the 1860s had long since disappeared. Nevertheless, Luther College remained what it had been since its founding: a classical school



*Oscar L. Olson, Luther's third president (1921-1932). (SHSI)*

for men recruited among rural and small-town Norwegian Lutheran families of modest means. The new president in 1921, Oscar Olson, dedicated himself to preserving the school essentially as it had been when he was a student in the 1890s and as it still was when he came into office. It appeared in 1921 that Olson's reaffirmation of the tradition was not inconsistent with the prospects of growth and development.

Despite what must have appeared to outsiders as a narrow curriculum, Luther graduates experienced neither more nor less career difficulties than graduates of other colleges. They were well prepared to go on to study for the traditional learned professions of the ministry, law, and medicine; those who took the required education courses could secure teaching positions in history, English, foreign languages, mathematics, and chemistry; and by all

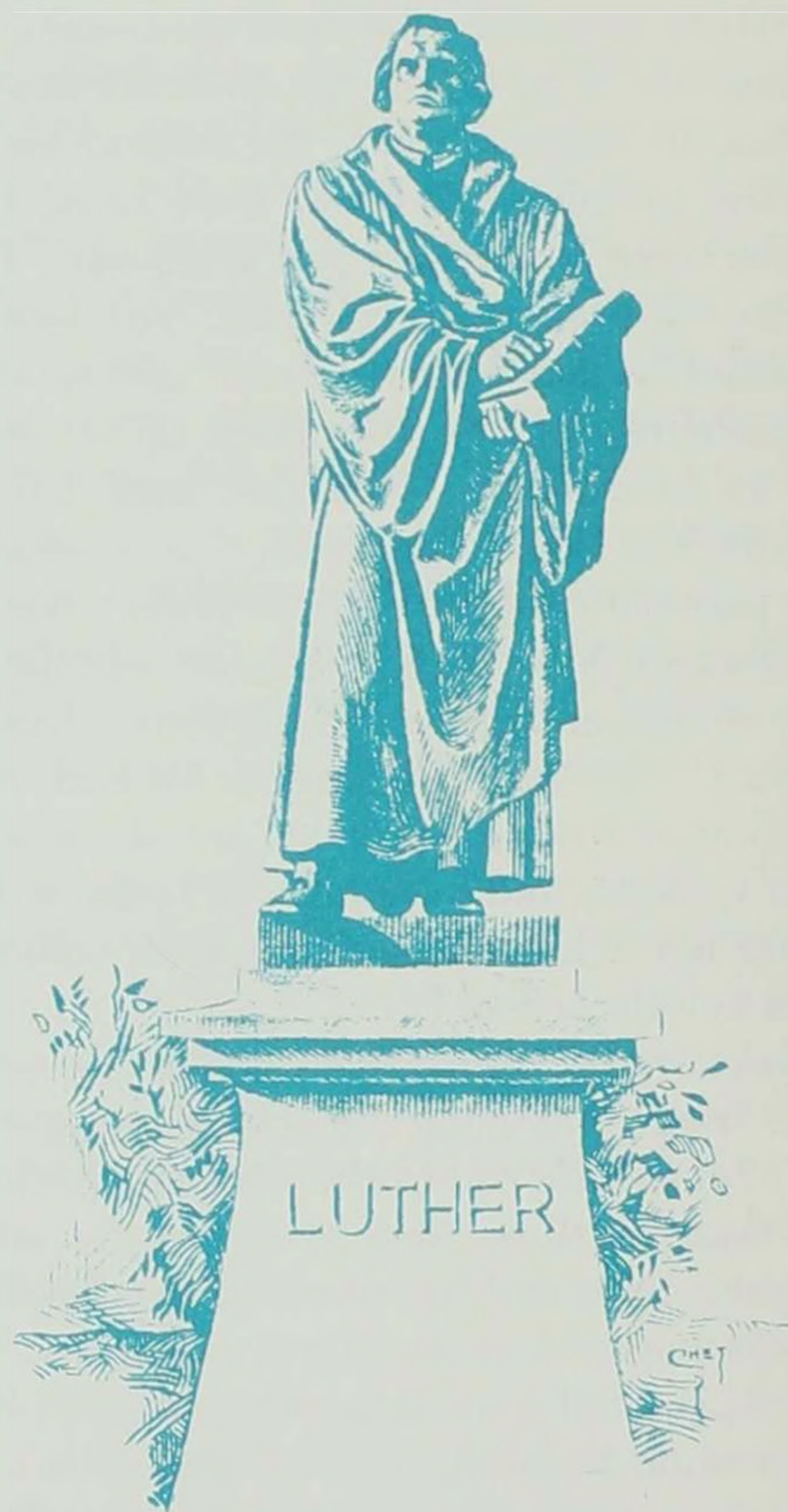


evidence, graduates were not handicapped in the competition for jobs in business.

Although Luther's traditional "gentleman's curriculum" appeared still to be working in 1921, it was becoming more and more difficult to make the classics appear "relevant" to the students. One classics professor, who taught at Luther from 1918 to 1970, recollected in later years about what a problem motivation had been when he had to teach beginning Greek to three sections of freshmen, most of whom knew full well that they were never going to use their Greek in any practical way. It was also true, of course, that many students never did develop enough skill to read Virgil or Cicero, much less Homer or Euripides, as literature. Rather, they got stuck with a tedious word-by-word deciphering process. Nor, except for the fairly large number of minister's sons, did Luther recruit many students who came from homes where literature was much read or discussed. Luther had, after all, an entirely different kind of constituency than the elite colleges of the Eastern Seaboard, where by the 1920s the classical curriculum had lost out even despite a gentry tradition. Luther was fighting, as it became clear later, a rearguard action.

Whatever might have been happening at other colleges, Luther's sixtieth anniversary was an optimistic celebration of its curricular distinctiveness. And the enrollment continued to increase. The preparatory department closed for lack of students in 1928, but over 350 students were enrolled in the college that same fall. The campus plant was in excellent shape and the faculty had impressive credentials compared to faculties at some other colleges.

Nevertheless, there were dark clouds on the horizon. The Norwegian Synod had merged with the two other major Norwegian Lutheran groups in 1917 to form a larger church. Luther, before then *the* college of its denomination, became in the new church only one among several others. Luther thus had to compete with schools that were coeducational and that



had modern elective curricula. The most eminent scholar on Luther's faculty, Knut Gjerset, whose histories of Iceland and Norway are listed even today in standard bibliographies, had been warning for some time that the Luther curriculum did not fit the character of its constituency and, had in fact, even if unintentionally, become elitist. Instead of heeding the signs of the times and engaging in a thoroughgoing reform, the Luther faculty improvised with modifications that seriously compromised the classical curriculum, without getting at the root of the problems. Then with the national economic collapse of the late 1920s Luther found itself in dire financial straits and, by 1931, in the midst of an enrollment disaster. Questions arose, and were to continue to sur-



face all through the 1930s and early 1940s, as to whether or not the college could survive.

President Olson led the faculty in a thoroughgoing curricular reform during the 1931-32 academic year. By the next year Luther had adopted an entirely new curriculum, identical in essentials to those in existence at other colleges. A full range of majors and minors was introduced and core distribution requirements were severely reduced. For the first time in its history, Luther students could graduate with no courses in Latin or Greek. For the first time also in its history not every graduate was automatically prepared to enter a seminary. Olson also advocated coeducation and his faculty concurred in the judgment.

According to the articles of incorporation prevailing at the time, major changes had to be ratified by Luther's supporting denomination. The coeducation request was initially refused while the curricular reform was approved. In 1932 Olson resigned from the presidency to return to the classroom. Luther had abolished its classical tradition, and the modern period in the college's history had begun. The gala celebration of 1921 had been, as it were, the high-water mark in the history of a school that had been through its first seventy-one years — a valiant upholder of an old tradition. By 1932 part of that tradition could best be described as anachronistic.

### *The Modern College Develops: 1932-1961*

In the summer of 1932, O.J.H. Preus (the son of Luther's earlier president, C.K. Preus) left the presidency of Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to assume the presidency of Luther College. He faced a desperate situation: declining enrollment, a financial crisis that bordered on the disastrous, reduced faculty salaries with four professors already released for reasons of financial exigency,

uncertainty about the school's future existence, and serious proposals from church leaders to merge Luther with one of two other colleges and close up the Decorah operations.

Despite sore disappointment that coeducation was not approved, several enthusiastic Decorah citizens determined to make a college education available for young women in Decorah. Independent of official Luther College support, they worked with amazing speed and dispatch during the summer of 1932. By August, articles of incorporation had been drawn up for what became the Decorah College for Women; a vacant mansion was secured for housing and classes; a faculty of sorts was assembled (mostly Luther College teachers who agreed to teach classes at the new school on a part-time basis); and the new school opened on September 14, with an enrollment of twenty-four. The women were allowed to



*O.J.H. Preus, Luther's fourth president (1932-1948). (SHSI)*



use the Luther Library and to register for biology there. Otherwise the classes were separated. Because the school had no direct affiliation with Luther and was not expressly Lutheran, some at Luther College were lukewarm about the new venture. Oscar Olson, for all his advocacy of coeducation during the last years of his presidency, feared that "in the long run [it] would . . . adversely affect the distinctly Lutheran spirit of the college."

The fears proved groundless. In fact, when the women came they set a high standard for good manners and piety. By the second year of the women's venture, steps were taken that resulted, for practical purposes, in making Luther coeducational. From that time on, all courses were taught on the Luther campus and both Luther and the Decorah College for Women listed the same faculties. The enroll-

ment of women rose to sixty in 1935-36, and in 1936 the convention of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America approved coeducation. When the college in the fall of 1936 celebrated its diamond jubilee it had come full circle: a classical college for men had in every sense become a mainstream American liberal arts college. Its distinctiveness had been surrendered but the changes would assure its long-term survival.

Finances remained tight throughout the 1930s. Enrollment gradually rose to just under 500 by 1941, and the college had managed to survive a serious reaccreditation examination in 1937 by the North Central Association. Although the visitation team had uncovered such serious weaknesses that "judged by the measures portrayed and the pattern map this college should not be continued on the list of



*In the 1930s Luther became coeducational. The Floradora Sextet in 1935/36 included (from left): Eleanor Dorrum, Ruth Luzum, Solveig Dorrum, Agnes Engell, Dorcas Jacobson, and Helen Hoff. (courtesy Winneshiek County Historical Society Archives, Luther College, Preus Library)*



accredited colleges," the team nevertheless recommended approval because of "certain intangible qualities of good scholarship that persist in spite of the obvious weaknesses." A building plant that had been excellent for a men's college with a mostly required curriculum was inadequate for a coeducational school offering majors in almost twenty departments. The church subsidy, although generous, was barely sufficient to keep a budget, otherwise dependent solely on student charges, in the black. The faculty was entirely too small and, in many cases, inadequately prepared for the full range of course offerings.

No sooner had Luther survived the Great Depression than it was hit by the outbreak of World War II. Since, despite coeducation, enrollment remained over two-thirds male, the drafting of young men into military service was harder on Luther than on many colleges with a more balanced male-female student ratio. Enrollment plummeted to a low point of slightly over 200 in the spring of 1944. In 1942 the beautiful Main Building, which housed offices, classrooms, and rooms for upper-classmen, was destroyed by fire. Talk was still going around in church circles that Luther "has no future." Had it not been for some especially loyal alumni who were also among the denominational leadership it is not entirely improbable that the college might have been closed down. Luther relied almost entirely on the church constituency for its student body and any loosening of those ties would inevitably have sentenced it to death. A combination of constituency support and the truly heroic self-sacrifice of the college administration and faculty allowed Luther to survive a crisis period that extended from 1932 through the war years.

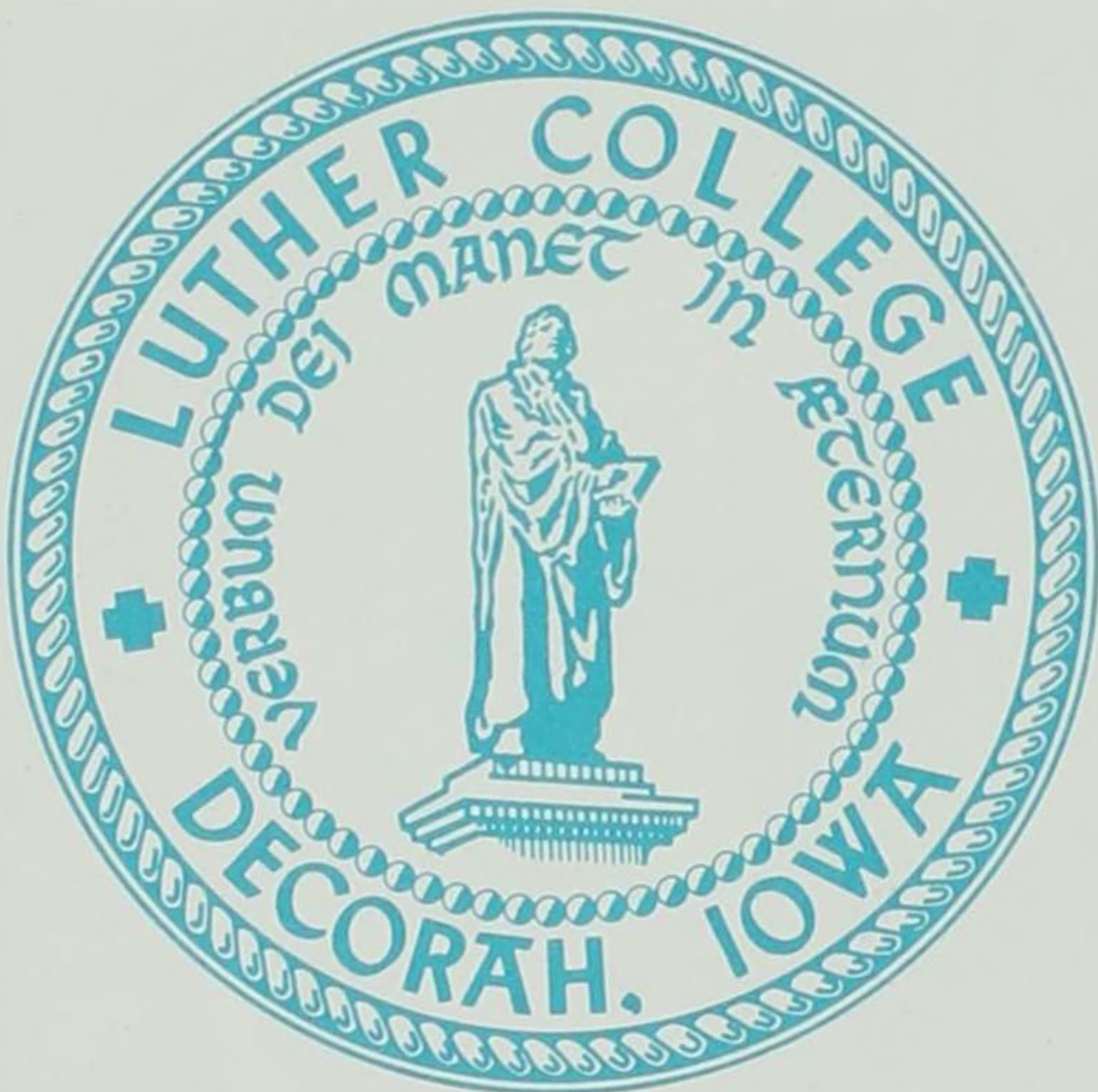
The coming of peace in 1945 created for Luther College, as for numerous other colleges, its greatest period of opportunity. With the discharge of the veterans and the opportunities offered by the GI Bill of Rights, one of



*J.W. Ylvisaker, Luther's fifth president (1948-1962). (SHSI)*

the truly extraordinary events in American social history occurred. The GI Bill made it possible for countless numbers of returning veterans to think realistically about an economic and social mobility that had previously seemed unattainable. Moreover, among Luther's ethnic constituency, certain traditional characteristics had been held to longer than among others of the nation. In the rural schools and small towns in which so many Norwegians lived, assimilation had been slow in coming. Up to the late 1930s many of their young people did not attend high school and few even thought of college as a possibility. Now all that changed. Young Norwegians began to experience the world in new ways. Less and less did they think of themselves as anything other than mainstream Americans, and the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America itself was rapidly becoming part of main-



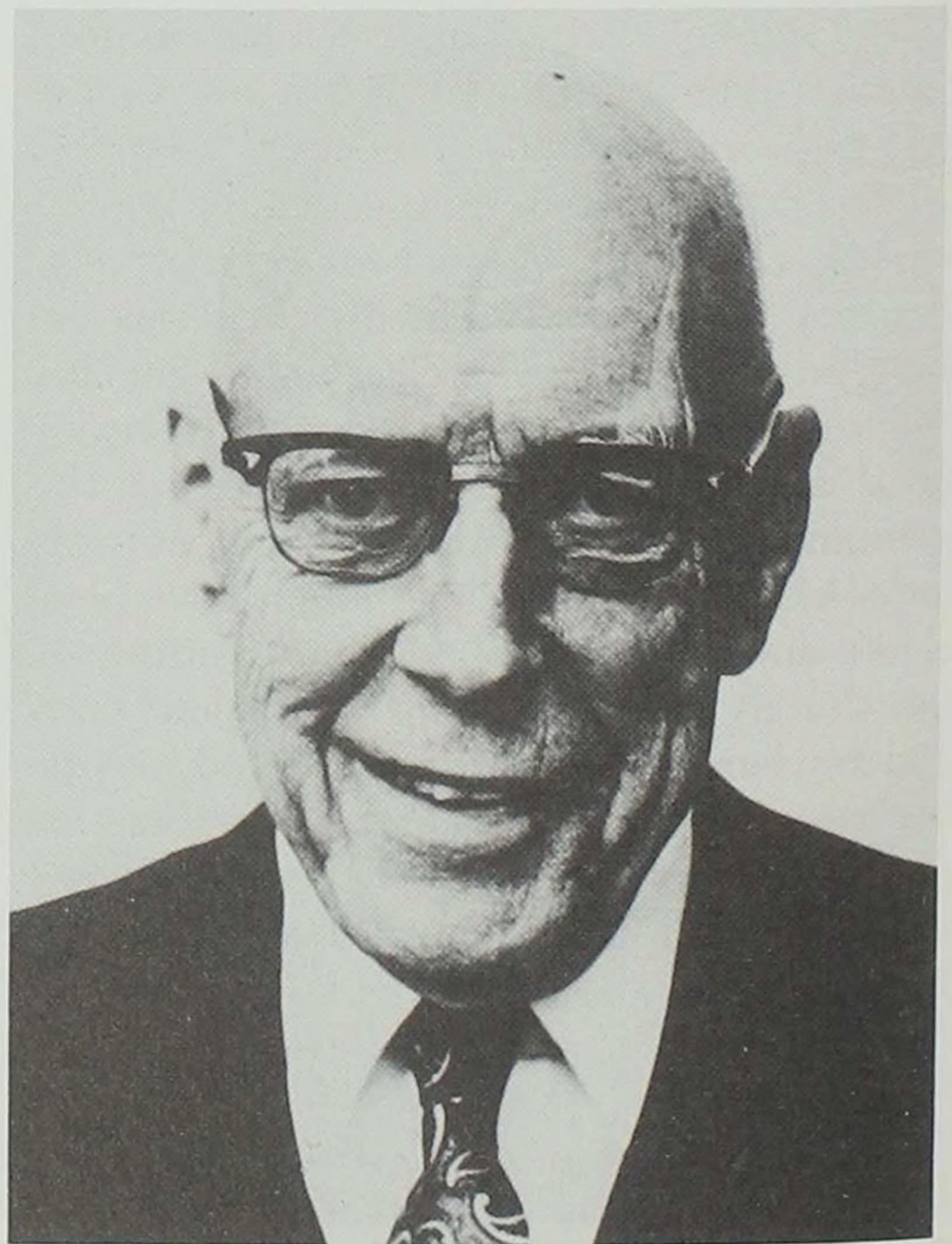


stream American Protestantism. It soon dropped "Norwegian" from its official name. Norwegian Lutheran fathers and mothers watched proudly as their sons and daughters went off to church colleges to take up their places in America. (It should be noted that in those days expenses at a church school like Luther were not much higher than at a state school.)

Fortunately, Luther College had splendid leadership during the postwar years. Already in 1936, O.W. Qualley had been appointed vice-president of the college. On the faculty since 1918, Qualley was to prove the academic master of the school for a quarter of a century following 1936. J.W. Ylvisaker succeeded Preus as president in 1948. Ylvisaker became a first-rate public relations man, a leader with a vision of an expanded Luther, and a tactful but steady promoter of Luther within the Norwegian Lutheran constituency. The people of the church had confidence that Ylvisaker knew how to build a good college. Qualley, in the dean's office, devoted his unbounded energies to building a strong faculty, academically well-trained and skilled as classroom teachers. With a truly ingenious ability to size up talent,

Qualley recruited a young, energetic faculty, mostly drawn from graduates of Luther or one of the other Lutheran colleges and enthusiastic about teaching at a church-related liberal arts college. Together Qualley and Ylvisaker, although very different in their personalities, administered Luther with a harmony that must be rare in the history of higher education. Both wanted a good school; both were also oriented toward the traditional Luther constituency. Both wanted to take their academic models from the best in educational circles while, at the same time, neither was even slightly interested in turning Luther into anything but a distinctive college of the church.

Luther prospered under the Ylvisaker-Qualley administration. A massive building program was undertaken. The faculty grew in size and quality. Enrollment steadily increased, so that by the centennial year of 1961,



*O.W. Qualley, faculty member and vice-president during Ylvisaker and Farwell administrations. (photographer, Jay Kamin; courtesy Luther College News Bureau, LCA)*



the physical plant was on the way to being almost all new, the enrollment had increased to 1,300, and Luther College was recognized as a school of quality, even if not yet in a league with some of the better known colleges of the Upper Midwest. In any event, the comments made by the visitation team of 1937 read like irrelevant words from some dim and distant past.

The centennial celebrations of 1961 marked the end of Luther's second period. The student body was ninety percent Lutheran; the tenured faculty was totally Lutheran; and the school still served mainly those same "Norwegians, Lutheran Christians, living in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois" that it had been founded to serve in 1861.

### *The Last Quarter of a Century: 1961-1986*

If the period between 1932 and 1961 witnessed the most radical educational transformation in the history of Luther College, the period since 1961 has witnessed the greatest social transformation. A school almost entirely oriented toward an ethnic constituency has become, compared with 1961, cosmopolitan. While the student body remains sixty percent Lutheran, the Lutherans are no longer overwhelmingly Norwegian. Non-Lutherans, especially Methodists and Roman Catholics are well represented in the student body. The rules for student behavior have been radically modified (the rules of 1961 were not, however, much different from those at numerous private colleges with no church relations, except in the prohibition of dancing) and students today enjoy a freedom undreamed of a quarter of a century ago. Cities and towns produce more students today for Luther than do the rural communities. The faculty includes almost as many non-Lutherans as Lutherans and far fewer of them are graduates of other church colleges. Luther College has continued to



*Elwin D. Farwell, Luther's sixth president (1963-1981).  
(courtesy LCA)*

improve its image and find itself a prestigious college, something that was not dreamt of twenty-five years ago. One keen observer has put it quite simply: "A good college has become an excellent college."

When Elwin D. Farwell succeeded J.W. Ylvisaker in 1963, he determined to build on the tradition of quality he inherited and to push it even further in the direction of "a vision of greatness." Yet he also determined that change at Luther should be balanced with stability and that the college should remain a purposeful school of the church.

Some have referred to so-called church colleges as existing in one of two extreme fashions: as a "defender of the faith"; or as a "non-affirming church-related" type. President Farwell intended to avoid both extremes. Contrary to what some outsiders had occasionally thought, Luther had never really been a "defender of the faith" school. To put it more precisely, it had been a school where religious homogene-



ity and ethnic identity had been so taken for granted that there was little occasion to critically examine the tradition. The days for that homogeneity were coming to an end by the early 1960s. Certainly, the ethos that went with that tradition could not have survived at Luther into the late 1960s. Farwell saw the need for change. Farwell was, at the same time, thoroughly committed to the tradition of a liberal arts college informed by a self-conscious Christian understanding of its mission. He also knew — he was an alert pragmatist at this point — that Luther's denominational constituency constituted the single best thing going for it in terms of recruitment. The Farwell administration turned its energies toward preserving the Christian tradition while also broadening that tradition within its cultural context.

Luther's new administration intended also to preserve an overriding commitment to the traditional arts and sciences but to be at the same time sensitive to career goals of students. It worked hard to recruit excellent students but, at the same time, to avoid signs of academic elitism. Wisely, it was recognized that Luther would have its best future by recognizing that its student body would probably continue to represent what it traditionally had represented: a lower-middle to middle-class constituency with a Lutheran base. Even today a large number of Luther College students are the first generation from their families to go to college.

The student body increased during the 1960s and 1970s and then leveled off at about 2,000. The faculty almost doubled, and numerous new departments were established, especially in the social sciences in which Luther had been slow to develop concentrations. As might have been expected, the areas of accounting and management attracted more and more students including large numbers of women. Yet less career-oriented liberal arts majors continued to do well. Core distribution

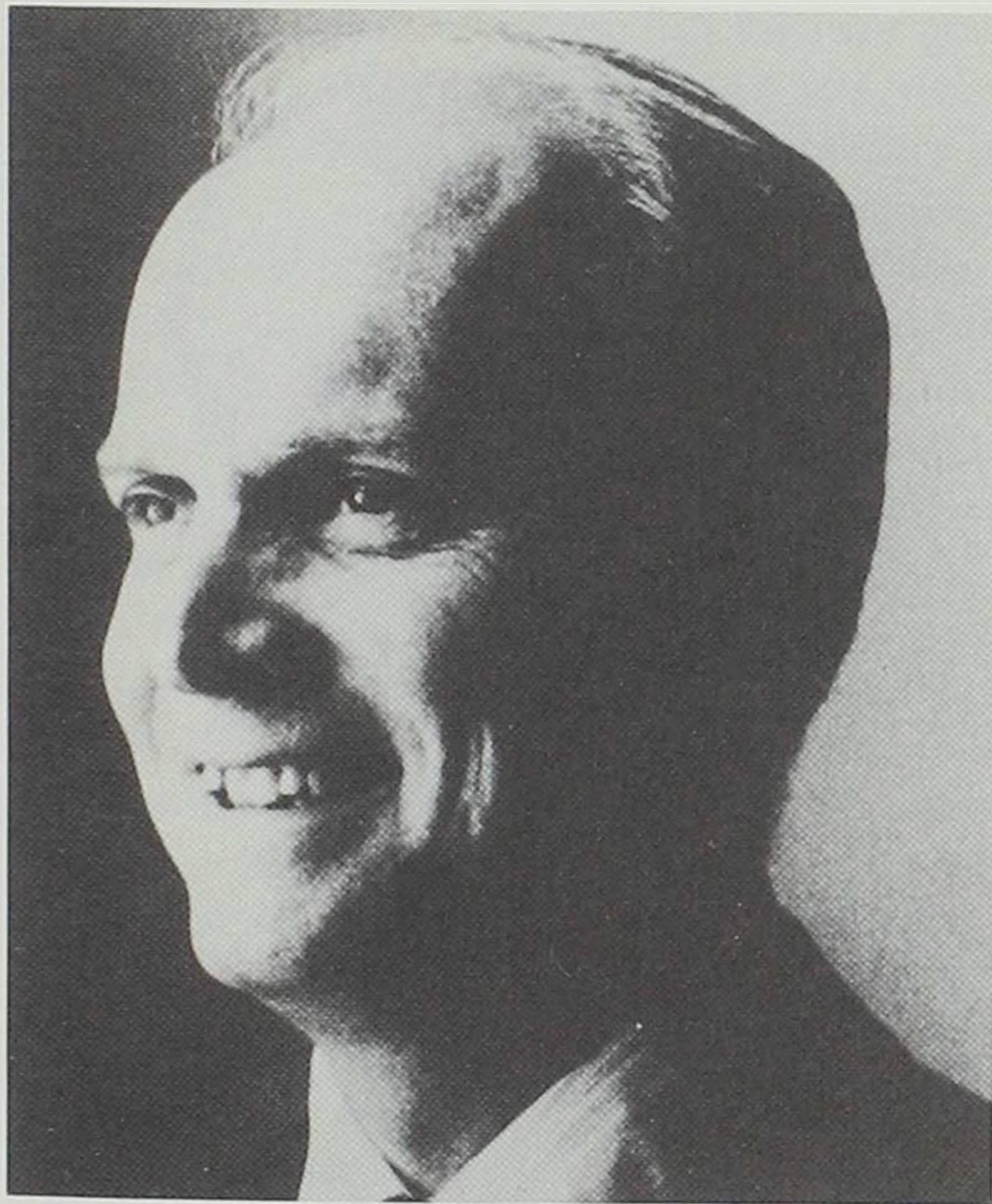
requirements were not discarded, and all attempts to introduce degrees other than the bachelor of arts were defeated. The quality of students admitted steadily increased. Even in the tough recruitment days of the early 1980s the college was not forced to tailor its offerings to the demands of a rapidly changing job market, and the dormitories were full on a campus that has remained overwhelmingly residential.

When Elwin Farwell retired in 1981, he left behind a strong college that had proven the essential compatibility of change and stability. The college really was "at once a community of faith and a community of learning." The continued success of the liberal arts was evidenced in that same year by the announcement that the college now had a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

H. George Anderson was inaugurated as the seventh president of Luther College in the spring of 1982. He brought to his task impressive credentials. His inauguration was another of those gala celebrations at Luther College.

The college Anderson came to lead was a very different school than that inherited by O.J.H. Preus in 1932, or that which Elwin D. Farwell had come to serve in 1963. Preus had faced the desperate problem of the survival of a school on the edge of bankruptcy. Farwell came to office during those happy years of growth and expansion when private colleges were flourishing as never before. By the time Farwell retired in 1981, national observers of private liberal arts colleges had become prophets of gloom. President Anderson set himself the task of insuring that Luther would beat such gloomy predictions. Yet he was also realistic about the college. Its future as a viable church-related liberal arts college was, by all indications, well assured. Yet expansion, such as that during the 1960s and 1970s, was probably over for a least a while. The task in the 1980s was to maintain a stable enrollment, increase the financial base, and, most impor-





H. George Anderson, Luther's seventh president (1982-) (courtesy LCA).

tantly, build on and improve an already established standard of excellence. In short, President Anderson wished the college to remain true to its overall commitment of being "the church in higher education, calling and preparing people to serve in the world."

If the founders of Luther College could see their school today they would be amazed. For that matter, any former student who had not returned to campus during the last half century would likewise be amazed. The entrance to the campus has changed little. Otherwise almost everything else is different. Only a few of the old buildings are left — only one remains from the nineteenth century and only three others

from before 1948. Koren Library, so proudly dedicated in 1921, is a candidate for restoration and renovation and has long since ceased to house the book collection. The beautiful Old Main, the campus landmark for more than half a century, has been replaced by a more functional but far less striking building. The campus is no longer a forest of oaks, although oaks are still the main trees on campus. In place of the forest there are now new buildings on a spaciouly landscaped campus. Gone long ago are the days when the faculty coffeed together day in and day out at the big tables in the old dining hall. Gone too, for that matter, are the days when almost all faculty members could be counted on to be present at virtually every campus event. Neither can it be taken for granted that everyone knows everyone else. Luther may be a "small college," but to those who knew it half a century ago it has become a big college indeed. Yet those from years past and those from years present all know the motto with which Laur. Larsen began his work and with which Luther celebrates its *quasquicentennial*: *Soli Deo Gloria*. □

#### Note on Sources

Of earlier Luther College histories there are four, each valuable for information not available in the others. Johan Th. Ylvisaker, *Luther College* (Decorah, 1890); Gisle Bothne, *The Norwegian Luther College, 1861-1897* (Decorah, 1897); O.M. Norlie, O.A. Tingelstad, Karl T. Jacobsen, eds., *Luther College Through Sixty Years, 1861-1921* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1922); and David T. Nelson, *Luther College, 1861-1961* (Decorah: Luther College Press, 1961). The last is the definitive interpretive account of Luther's first century. Leigh D. Jordahl's *Stability and Change: Luther College in Its Second Century* (Decorah, 1986), surveys the earlier period, but concentrates on the last quarter of a century and thus brings the Nelson volume up to date.